

Slaves No More: The Caring Power of African-American Female Leaders

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Abstract

In this article the author examines the historical significance of the cultural aspect of race on African American females' leadership values and styles that encourage caring in schools. The author focuses her study by asking: What aspects of their (African American female leaders) cultural backgrounds as Africans and as African Americans contribute to their perceptions and enactments of leadership? In particular, the author examines African American female leadership using the frameworks of Racial Uplift and Oneness of Being, both concentrated in spirituality and discussed from the perspectives of African worldview and American female slavery. Finally, the author probes the importance of those aspects in describing qualities of leadership necessary to effect schools in which caring occurs. The author poses connections between the cultural attributes of African American women who lead, and the leadership qualities that are needed to establish schools in which caring flourishes.

They were women then
My mama's generation
Husky of voice—Stout of
Step
With fists as well as
Hands
How they battered down
Doors
And ironed

Starched white
 Shirts
 How they led
 Armies
 Headragged Generals
 Across mined
 Fields
 Booby-trapped
 Kitchens
 To discover books
 Desks
 A place for us
 How they knew what we
Must know
 Without knowing a page
 Of it
 Themselves.

—Alice Walker

In Search of Our Mothers' Garden

Walker suggests that Black women of earlier generations were strong, gentle, hard, soft, wise, unschooled, rational and intuitive. They sensed the need for opposites and tensions to maintain order. They served and sacrificed themselves for their kin, working at all times for racial uplift. They lead without the benefit of positional authority, and used their personal power to care for their communities and for themselves. They had a mission born out of the desire for freedom, personal and civic. Despite their lack of formal or legitimate roles, they were leaders.

In this article, I focus on the historical significance of the cultural aspect of race on African American females' leadership values and styles that encourage caring in schools. I chose these women for two reasons. First, as Black women they are among the least privileged group in this nation, they continue to be mythologized and, practically speaking, viewed as the backbone, the mainstay, of their race. What makes them leaders despite the nature of their positions in public or private, formal or informal, "front" or "back" circumstances? Second, those who identify themselves as *African Americans* understand a shared American history, especially that of slavery, and perceive an African history that contributes to their identities. What aspects of their cultural backgrounds as Africans and as African Americans contribute to their perceptions and enactments of leadership? From those discussions, I pose connections between the cultural attributes of African American women who lead, and the leadership qualities that are needed to establish schools in which caring flourishes. Of specific interest is the ability to balance power with caring.

Introduction

Importance of Culture

Studies of leadership have focused on Western tradition and thought, no doubt because white, Euro-American males have occupied the majority of positions of authority in professional and publicly significant institutions. Recently, a notable body of leadership inquiry addresses differences in administrative styles, taking into consideration characteristics most often identified with females, such as importance of relationships, community building, and caring (Beck, 1994; Bizar & Barr, 2001; Blackmore, 1989; Blackmore & Kenway, 1993; Cantor & Bernay, 1992; Deal & Peterson, 1999; Eaker, DuFour, & Burnette (2002); Ferguson, 1984; Furman, 2002; Jagers & Carroll, 2002; Kanter, 1977; Noddings, 1992; Regan, 1990; Rusch & Marshall, 1995; Shields, 2002; Wheatley, 2002). That research has only just begun to catch up with the ways in which race, ethnicity, and one's larger cultural background influence administrative behaviors and aims (Dixson, 2003; Tillman, 2002). American women have begun speaking to the importance of cultural African heritage in Black women's style of, and success in, their roles as leaders (Delpit, 1995; Dillard, 1994; Foster, 1993; Jackson, 1990; Vaughn & Everett, 1992). Of particular consequence in those discussions is the connection between gender *and* culture, especially in relation to race.

Cultural background, not from an essentialist perspective but as an alternative to the hegemonic tradition of schooling, is a necessary component in the examination and study of leadership (Fields & Feinberg, 2001; Henig, Hula, Orr, & Pedescleaux, 2001; Scheurich, 1998). Children whose backgrounds do not mirror Euro-American traditions, culture, and value systems too often fail in school, are under-served, or are not being served by schools operating within the traditional bureaucracy (Brimijoin, Marquissee, & Tomlinson, 2003; Giroux, 2001, 2003; Haycock, 2002/2003; Martin, 2000; Nieto, 2002/2003). Research indicates that all children, but expressly those who live in poverty and/or are of non-Euro-American cultures, need schools that (1) value relationship building and community; (2) encourage interdependence as well as independence between and among students, parents, faculty, administration, and staff (Fields & Feinberg, 2001); (3) value racial culture and appreciate, love, and respect children of color; (4) believe that all children, including those of color, "can achieve at the highest academic levels" (Scheurich, 1998, p. 455). Those qualities, among the primary constructs of an ethic of care (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984), indicate a need for school leaders who are able to create schools in which those values are the norm (Futrell, Gomez, & Bedden, 2003).

Culture and Caring

Nel Noddings (1992) issued a challenge to the education community to develop school curricula and practices within an ethic of care. However, before such a call can be accepted, educators must consider the *cultural* implications of caring.

Implicit in Noddings' challenge is the notion that caring is understood and enacted in similar ways across cultures. I contend that one's culture, including race and ethnicity, influences people's understanding of caring and, therefore, impacts the leadership necessary in schools composed of a multicultural student body. Depending upon one's racial/ethnic background, nurturing and considerate acts may be rendered and perceived differently by various persons. Given that, policymakers advocating collaboration and community require sensitivity to the need for culturally appropriate approaches to leadership. To create schools that support children whose race and ethnicity differ from the political majority is to develop a schooling process that is not entirely like that advocated by the political norm, but which also encompasses different boundaries that enable students to succeed in different ways. Implicit is the notion that leaders of various cultural backgrounds may enact structural and organizational concepts of leadership and caring that may not be in sync with those of the hegemonic society. Recognizing that traditional schools no longer meet the needs of great numbers of children (Darling-Hammond, 1996), there is the necessity to change the parameters of schooling to ensure the academic success of all children. Such success emanates not only from the No Child Left Behind Act, but, more importantly, from a social justice perspective, which views schooling as a primary source from which to gain an equitable life for all persons. Different organization, pedagogy, and curricula will be crucial, for the master's tools will not dismantle the master's house (Lorde, 1996).

This article begins with discussions of caring and culture. Next, I examine African American female leadership using the frameworks of Racial Uplift and Oneness of being, both concentrated in spirituality and discussed from the perspectives of African worldview and American female slavery. Finally, I probe the importance of those aspects in describing qualities of leadership necessary to effect schools in which caring occurs. Not only do I suggest that culture influences leadership style, but that sensitivity to cultural understandings and different perceptions of caring may result in successful efforts to create schools in which nurturing and concern for individuals and communities takes place.

Theoretical Framework

Caring

As a result of a variety of interactions with African American women, I posited the notion that the concept of caring is not neutral, but carries cultural connotations. I considered Noddings' (1984) characterizations of caring as relational, reciprocal, situated, and requiring commitment, and juxtaposed them to writings of African Americans (Appiah, 1992; Asante, 1987; Asante & Asante, 1985; Jones, 1985). I surmised that cultural differences are not philosophical, but are disparities in the *enactment* of caring and the *perceptions of acts* as caring by both the caregiver and care-receiver. The behaviors and understandings, furthermore, may depend upon

the historical background and experiences that persons inherit and live, both within and outside their particular cultures (Allen-Haynes, St. John, & Cadray, 2003). Subsequently, I suggest that Noddings' framework for caring is both culture-neutral and culture-specific. The characteristics of relation, reciprocity, situatedness, and commitment that transcend culture are universal. Yet, comprehension and acts of caring derive from one's particular background, traditions, and values (Cain, 1993; Eagleton, 2000). I suggest that an ethic of caring, as an aspect of feminist theory, needs re-visioning from perspectives of women of color, especially as they contribute to understandings of children of color and of low SES backgrounds.¹

Black women's African heritage and history as slaves in the U.S. influenced their social and economic subordination in modern society, as well as their roles in church and community (Davis, 1981; Eugene, 1989; Giddings, 1988; hooks, 1981; James & Busia, 1993; Jones, 1985; Knupfer, 1996; Lemke-Santangelo, 1996; Lykes, 1989; Richards, 1985; Tembo, 1985). Their past and its resulting legacy impacted the ways in which the women view their responsibilities to themselves and to their race. African American women signify the importance of racial uplift, and of community identity with which personal identity is inextricably intertwined (Sernak, 1998). To transform schools will require caring for and among a *community* of people. Subsequently, an examination of the influence of African and African American history and culture on Black women's ability to care in the context of a collective entity is warranted to further understandings of caring leadership and school communities.

Defining Culture

Although persons understand *culture* from more than an anthropological perspective, in this article, I focus on the term as it applies to identifiable collective groups that have evolved through their common histories, particularly those of race. Addressing ethnicity as it relates to culture, John Edwards explains collective culture as a "sense of group identity deriving from real or perceived common bonds such as language, race, or religion," and, further, as "an involuntary state in which members share common socialisation practices . . ." (as cited in Etter-Lewis, 1996, p. 171). The *involuntary* nature of cultural identity allows for a breadth of interpretation of culture despite persons' individual beliefs or willingness to be included. Thus, Edwards implies that people absorb various cultural qualities to the degree that they are viewed as part of a particular culture, whether they choose to be or not.

K. A. Appiah (1992) seemingly refutes Edwards' notion of collective culture by stating that individuals define culture. He suggests that each person's identity is a composite of the perception of her *invented* history, biology, and cultural affinities, "each [of which] is a kind of role that has to be scripted, structured by conventions of narrative to which the world never quite manages to conform" (Appiah, 1992, p. 174). In other words, Appiah suggests that culture is not universal for a group, but is whatever the individual takes from the imagined culture to construct her own identity.

Ogundipe-Leslie (1993) brings together both Edwards' and Appiah's notions of culture, thus, providing a broader and more encompassing definition. Her understanding is that culture is

the total product of a people's 'being' and 'consciousness' which emerges from their grappling with nature and living with other humans in a collective group... the total self-expression of a people in the two relations basic to human existence in society: the relations between generic man and nature and the relations between person and person in that society. (pp. 105-106)

Ogundipe-Leslie maintains both Edward's notion of culture pre-existing and influencing one's identity, and Appiah's perspective of individual and group culture constructed by the inter-relationships between unique persons and between persons and the collective. More importantly, her conception of culture derives from a traditionally non-Western perspective, the significance of interactions people experience not only between and among themselves, but also between and among persons, the collective, and the natural environment. In this article, I use Ogundipe-Leslie's definition to identify and examine qualities of African American culture, for the latter stems from both Western and non-Western traditions.

To understand the influence of African and African American history on contemporary Black² female leaders necessitates discussions of Oneness of Being and Racial Uplift (survival of the race) as they form the sociocultural backdrop of Black women's leadership values and styles. In the remainder of this article, I examine the historical and cultural position of Black women who, through myth and/or reality, represent the strength and determination that hold their families and communities together. I use that background to discuss the women's leadership behavior as they strive to transform various institutions, including schools, into caring communities. Finally, I suggest that the perception of and behaviors intended to be caring reflect a leader's cultural background which, in turn, influences her understandings of staff and students' culture, and, ultimately, affects the degree to which caring communities may develop among people of differing traditions and ways of life.

Racial Uplift: Importance of Community

African worldview. Black feminist scholars (Collins, 1990; Davis, 1981; hooks, 1981) attempt to define and explain the contemporary African American female using the experience of slavery in America as their basis. However, other Black scholars suggest that the "total product" must include the continuance of the traditional African worldview as a delineating framework for the fundamental structures and functions of the contemporary Black family and the woman's role within it (Nobles, 1974b). Mbiti defines the reality of that family life as the "understanding, attitude of mind, logic and perception behind the manner in which African peoples think, act, or speak in different situations of life" (as cited in Nobles,

1974b, p.12). Survival of the tribe, based on unity, collaboration, mutual responsibility, and reconciliation, forms the analytic framework of contemporary and traditional African and African American family structures, of which Black women are the keystones (Mbiti, 1970; Nobles, 1974a, 1974b).

Oneness of Being

African worldview. The ethos of Oneness, of the unity and continuity of all elements of life, emerges from a shared cultural history derived from Africa and maintained through the “unique spirit and spiritual being” (Richards, 1985, p. 209) of that country. It is not an individual or idiosyncratic response to experience, but a reaction and reply that are shared by the larger community. Sharing common heritages and events creates emotional bonds between and among the people, thus forming their cultural society.

Rather than polarizing components of life (e.g., people, concepts, roles, functions) such as weak *or* strong, caring *or* justice, the African worldview advances the notion of continuity and union between and among elements, which Euro-Americans view as starkly, contrasted (Richards, 1985; Tembo, 1985). Life consists of complimentary pairs—good and evil, right and wrong, rich and poor — both of which are necessary and interdependent and function in a unified system (Morrison, 1974; Richards, 1985). The goal is “to discover the point of harmonious interaction, so that interferences become neutralized, allowing constructive energy to flow and to be received.... To the African the sacred and the profane are close and can be experienced as unity” (Richards, 1985, p. 211). That is possible because of the “multidimensional nature of the African universe” (Richards, 1985, p. 211), where phenomena and events are understood at various levels, simultaneously. Africans subscribing to that cultural ideal traverse the spectrum between antithetical ideas, perceiving the necessity of each in order to maintain balance in life and thought, and not feeling a compulsion to choose between them. Unlike the philosophy of Cartesian Europe and other Western nations, there is no “separation between the body and soul” (Tembo, 1985, p. 194).

African American Female Slave History

A belief in the Oneness of Being enabled female slaves to endure abuse, humiliation, and attempts to obliterate their culture, in large part by eliminating their native languages and names, and all else that contributed to the essences of their beings and consciousness (Gould, 1996; hooks, 1981; Ogundipe-Leslie, 1993; Robertson, 1996). Trusting in ultimate unity of all elements, slave women defined and re-defined aspects of their lives using, as George Gregory Jackson identified, “‘syncretistic reasoning,³ [and] intuitive, holistic, affective’ patterns of thought in which ‘comprehension [came] through sympathy’” (Tronto, 1993, p. 84). The women sought to make sense of, and to achieve harmony from, the disparity between their actual circumstances and their fundamental cultural practices and

beliefs. Slave women traversed opposites to locate the “harmonious interaction” by merging the public and private as a way of political resistance; by being both “lady” and “whore,” as they used sexuality to protect their families through surrendering their bodies for food and clothing; and by using religion, the masters’ Christianity, and spirituality, African ritual, to find congruence between the chaos of slavery and order of their communal life.

Emphases on interconnectedness and interdependence of communities were adapted from the African ethos, serving to enable enslaved communities to cope with the exploitation and oppression of slavery. Several positive cultural adaptations of the slaves to patriarchal African ideology resulted in methods that served to uplift the race.

Fictive kin⁴ networks were formed as slaveholders threw people indiscriminately into one hut. “Family” became all those interdependent upon each other. Children were important to slave mothers who saw them as extensions of their own identities and, more importantly, as a continuation of the race and as proof of their own existence (Jones, 1985). African communal societies diffused parenting to engender the notion of community responsibility (Robinson, 1985). When the slaves were freed, the women continued to be the strength of the families by employing many of the methods they used to protect themselves and their kin during slave days. They worked side-by-side with the men as sharecroppers. They stayed behind with their children when their men moved north to find more lucrative work. They moved North when their men died, left them, or were without jobs, and formed kinship groups with other women and children in order to have the material needs for survival. They worked in housekeeping positions to supplement their men’s income, or to bring home the only salary, for Black men were the first to be laid off (Jones, 1985). They used their churches and women’s clubs to become activists for civil and human rights (Giddings, 1988; Knupfer, 1996; Lemke-Santangelo, 1996). They used their mothering skills to become community leaders, taking the lead to improve their housing areas and providing enrichment activities for the children and adults in the area (Naples, 1991, 1992; Sernak & Wolf, 1997).

Nobles (1974b) states that Black family systems can be thought of as African in nature and American in nurture as can the leadership style of African American women. In the next section, I discuss three women, all of whom are educational leaders. The foci for the discussion are (1) racial uplift, (2) spirituality, and (3) Oneness of Being.

Methods and Data Analysis

Participants

Three African American female administrators are the focus of this article. Two were principals, one high school, and one elementary; and, another was an assistant principal at an alternative high school. The high school principal, Mrs. J., was in

her late 50s; the elementary principal, Mrs. R., in her late 40s; and the assistant principal, Mrs. T., in her early 30s.

Sites

The sites were public schools located in Midwestern, urban neighborhoods noted for drugs, crime, and violence. Two of the schools were in the same city; the elementary school was in a larger city in a different state. Each of the schools had students, Black, Chicano, and Appalachian (White and extremely poor), from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Discipline problems, high dropout rates, unattractive physical facilities, and high teacher turnover characterized all the schools.

Data and Analysis

Data were gathered from semi-structured interviews. All were audio taped and transcribed; I also took notes during the interviews. I interviewed each participant at least three times, individual sessions lasting approximately two hours. More time was spent with Mrs. J. because she figured prominently in a larger research study (see Sernak, 1998). The assistant principal, Mrs. T., attended Mrs. J.'s school as a teenager, and also taught in that school prior to her assignment to the alternative high school; her comments span the range of those experiences. The elementary principal, Mrs. R., left her position after three years to pursue a doctoral degree.

To analyze the data, I used Black feminists' and sociologists' accounts and analyses of slave history from the perspective of slave *women* to determine characteristics of female slave history. A large body of research has been done on slavery, but from the male perspective. That is, the male researchers have treated *slave* and *slavery* from the point of view of males; female slaves were important only in the ways in which they illuminated researchers' (male) understandings of *slavery*. In my analysis, therefore, I concentrated on women's accounts and interpretations of their slave lives and historical backgrounds, and on researchers' work on the lives of slave women in order to understand what influences African American females might derive from experiences of their historical female kin.

I also used writings about Africanity and an African worldview, as named by and discussed from the perspective of African American scholars, to understand the philosophical and ideological bases for *African* thought. The latter was critical, for any examination of African American women must take into account not only the historical influences of slaves in America, but also the African heritage the slave women brought to the United States and subsequently used to modify their American heritage.

After multiple readings of the interviews, I narrowed the topics to three that I determined to be of most influence on the women in this study: (1) racial uplift, the importance of the community to individual and group identity; (2) spirituality, the basis of racial uplift and Oneness of being; and (3) Oneness of being as demonstrated by balancing power with caring. All of those issues support race as a critical factor

in African American women's leadership. I used them as the basis to discuss African American female leadership as the balance of power with caring.

My Situatedness in the Study

As a white woman writing about African American women administrators, I believe it is necessary to examine my position as it relates to the study *per se* and to the analysis. Such an examination is particularly important as I probe the issue of *cultural influence* in matters of leadership to create schools in which caring occurs.

The inception of this study occurred over twenty-five years ago when I was a novice teacher in an urban junior high populated with virtually all African American students. At one point early in my first semester, I struggled with "discipline". After several attempts to quiet the students and to gently urge them to take out their books, a child called out, "Why don't you hit us? Give us a smack." Startled, I responded with reasons for my not hitting students. The youngster repeated his question, this time more as a demand. Again, I explained my non-hitting policy. In exasperation, he jumped out of his seat, stood in front of me, and yelled in my face, "Why won't you hit us? Mr. Jones does. *Don't you like us?*" That incident never left me.

I had opportunities to meet, observe, and interview African American female leaders in studies of caring leadership (Sernak, 1998), in which I focused on the connection between caring and power. I noticed the ease with which they used their positional power to develop a climate of caring, appearing comfortable using authority — and at times, control. A spirituality and dedication to creating community, both within their schools and between the schools and the larger community, seemed to guide the women as they used their power to transform school into a cohesive, caring whole.

I sought to learn how they connected caring and power to achieve a delicate but stable balance between the two, for caring among many Western Euro-American women connotes softness and gentleness, with little or no room for the acknowledgement of power. I wanted to know if the historical background of female African Americans impacted the way in which contemporary African American women leaders approach their positions. Ultimately, I wanted to learn how their cultural perspectives might provide alternative ways to re-conceptualize caring leadership in schools, how they, in essence, might dismantle the master's house using *their own* tools.

African American Female Leaders: The Study

Racial Uplift: The Importance of Community

The idea of racial uplift encompasses a deep commitment to, and understanding of community (Collins, 1990). Family, extended family and community family held high priority for these women.

Importance of family. As their historical sisters, they believed family must be maintained and protected (Davis, 1981; Jones, 1985). Each had families; Mrs. R. and Mrs. T. were birth mothers and Mrs. J. a stepmother and grandmother. There was no doubt that husbands and children were an integral part of their lives. However, not once did I hear any of the participants complain about, or agonize over the place of family in their daily lives. Family and work were interwoven, one part of the other, each contributing to the other. Mrs. J. discussed at length her advice to her faculty members, "I'm not sure if you've ever heard this from a principal, but you need to go home. You need to spend time with your families." Regarding family and work, she said, "Somebody is missing something [when they stay late at school every night], and I don't expect that you can for any period of time do more . . . for somebody else's house than you are doing for your own." She believed that her faculty and staff needed to balance the responsibility between their work and their families. One was not to take precedence over the other, but was to be interwoven one with the other.

The two principals, nearing and over fifty years old, took on the role of "Othermother"⁵ in their schools. It was usual for Mrs. J. to meet with students to discuss their personal problems, such as a death in the family, or to meet with whole families to determine a plan to work out not only a student's school difficulties, but also pressing concerns that impacted family life. Of importance to Mrs. R. was the literal feeding and clothing of children. She established a food and clothing bank in her school, taking personal responsibility to identify children who needed either or both. The students and their families could be compared to fictive kin for the principals. The women referred to students, parents, teachers, and staff as their "family." The school became, in one way, the homeplace where the principals endeavored to create a climate in which their school families "could strive to be subjects, not objects, where [they] could be affirmed in [their] own minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation . . ." (hooks, 1990, p.42).

Mrs. T., the younger of the women and strong in her own right, appeared not to perceive herself as old enough — in life experience and in wisdom — to be an Othermother. Many faculty members were considerably older than she, with years of teaching experience to accompany their ages. Students viewed her "as a cross between an older sister or aunt and a peer. But I tell them I'm like their Mama and they'd better listen to what I say." And, when they refused to honor the contracts she worked out with them under given circumstances, they were out of the school, "because I can't let a few kids be bad role models for the hundreds more who can and will succeed. I'm willing to sacrifice — even though I hate doing it . . . but it's their — choice — so that the rest of the kids here make it. As a Black woman, it's my obligation to help the race as well as individual children."

She apprenticed herself to Mrs. J., meeting with her regularly for advice or to discuss school-generated situations that were problematic. She admired the male administrators with whom she worked, learning the bureaucratic processes from them. But, she felt that she gained a "greater balance from [Mrs. J] who knows how

to get things done and still be a model woman. She knows when to be soft and when she's got to use her authority." The assistant principal never referred to the faculty as "her" family in the sense of leading it. However, she mused about ways to "change older teachers, but, at the same time, let them know how much I respect them. I want them to grow."

The Black women in this project, like those in Vaughn and Everett's study (1992), "had little or no ambivalence about their responsibilities as women to have and care for a family, but, also, to extend their influence outside of the home" (p. 27). They defined themselves not by "the increased autonomy gained by separating oneself from others. Instead, self was found in the context of family and community" (Collins, 1990, p. 105). There was no dichotomy between working out of the home and in the home, for the community and the family were integral to the personages of the Black female leaders.

They all used community networking, Black women's organizations, and their churches as means by which to lead through the immediate neighborhoods and the larger Black community. They were models of success for the students, and they were much more. In a larger sense, linking the past with the present, they "transcended the physical deprivation that threatened to overwhelm" many of their students and students' families, leaving them "bereft of all hope and security" (Jones, 1985, p. 221). The women, through their dress, carriage, and "Othermothering," presented hope and the possibility of certainty to the members of their school communities (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Self-defined through community—school, neighborhood, race. Specific school goals were different for each of the women, but they held common overarching purposes of educating and caring for African American and poor children. All three women were in schools that the cities' residents and other educators considered high-risk.

Mrs. J.'s school had a high drop-out rate, with fewer than a third of entering freshman graduating; drugs and crime claimed more than their share of that school's students; few parents chose to send their children and few teachers elected to transfer there; and test scores were perceived to be the lowest in the city. The alternative school, Mrs. T's workplace, was the last resort for students who were expelled from other city or private schools; was the school to which the courts sent some students; and had a curriculum that was questionable. Teachers, according to Mrs. T, did care about students, although the caring resembled that of a beneficent benefactor. The elementary principal's school of 525 students, had eleven special education classes, sat in a neighborhood whose residents were on a limited income or welfare and lived in poorly maintained government housing or less, and was in range of bullets from drive-by shootings.

Why were these African American female leaders given these assignments as their first administrative positions? When I asked that question, the response was silence. None of them had considered their buildings out of the ordinary *in terms*

of their expectations for their work. Yet in the midst of interviewing, Mrs. R. stated matter-of-factly, “I was up against so many issues that a normal principal probably wouldn’t have to deal with because of the neighborhood. It was Dodge City!” She said that almost apologetically, hoping I would understand the problems she faced daily. Despite the problems, Mrs. R chose to be at that elementary school. What she observed as a teacher persuaded her to become a principal. “I looked at those teachers sitting at their desks or kids just working on worksheets and I knew I had to do something to get some real learning happening in the classroom. I couldn’t just watch those kids accomplishing little or nothing when I knew what kids were capable of in my classroom. I knew I could help if I was in a position to work with the teachers.”

Mrs. R. also believed the administrators in the central office would support her and had faith in her. She recalled that during her interview, the superintendent commented that he wanted an African American woman for that school. He believed a Black woman would have more empathy for the parents in the area, and that she would be “more likely to get along with and understand people from multiple races. He believed I could work with all those people and improve the children’s learning. He said I was ‘tough,’ but in a ‘good’ way.”

The other women in the study responded similarly. Mrs. J. remembered that she was “honored” with the offer to lead her school. She reacted in part to the fact that she was the first secondary female principal in the history of the city. To be given such a large school indicated to her a certain amount of trust by the central administrators. More importantly, she was aware of the difficulties faced by the teachers, students and staff, and knew that she had succeeded in a previous school by being a “caring person, that’s what I want people to remember me as, someone who cares, who truly cares.” She believed she could raise test scores, decrease the student dropout rate, and make the community — parents, teachers — students — proud of their school, not through more control measures, but by modeling caring. She refused to believe in the school’s negative reputation, but chose, instead, to focus on her vision of what it could be.

Of the three women, Mrs. T. was least comfortable in her school site. There was no neighborhood community, as students came from throughout the city. Faculty were older and not used to collaborating; administrators were managers more than leaders. She viewed her assignment to the alternative school as a challenge, but one in which she did not want to “be buried trying to meet it.” As a young Black woman, she was aware that her race and gender, in that order, demanded that she succeed in her current situation if she were to achieve her ultimate goal, becoming a principal in a “regular” urban school serving African American students (Blackmore & Kenway, 1993; Dillard, 1994; Grogan, 1996; Sernak, 1998). She was not uncommitted to her current position, but wrestled with a fear of not doing well enough to apply for a principalship in another school, and with anger that she, as a young African American woman, would be placed in, perhaps, the most difficult position

in the district. Could she become a model as a female African American leader, raising the standards of a school that existed only because it housed students no other school would take? Or would she “fail,” by maintaining the status quo, remain in that position, and not have her chance to work in a school within a neighborhood community? She wanted to see the best in the students, but had to be pragmatic when they failed. She wasn’t sure how much she could help advance the African American race in that position.

Bell and Chase (1995) note that administrators of color tend to seek positions where they will impact the education of students of color. The two principals essentially chose their schools so they would have the opportunity to work with African American youth. They attempted to hold the communities, school and neighborhood, together in order to uplift them, just as the Black slaves and mothers in the homeplaces did for their families (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1981; Vaughn & Everett, 1992).

Connecting self to the African American community. Like the slave women, the administrators were vitally connected to the Black community, yet maintained their individuality through their unique expression of common spirit, power, and energy (Collins, 1990). They recognized their importance as leaders and as private persons within the communities of school, neighborhood, and race. Honing their personal identities, the women transcended them to become one with their school communities and, in the greatest sense, “the ‘self’ of Black people” (Collins, p.105). Their unique personae provided a means by which others could discover themselves.

When I asked Mrs. R. how and when she decided to become an administrator, she laughed, and responded that she never wanted to go into administration. Then why did she? She was aware of students transferring into her school, and of teachers’ attitudes of not being able to work with them.

Something needed to be done. . . . The children we had in our school needed nurturing and I knew I did that. It took me a while, but I finally decided I had to do something to help the kids, to work with teachers to show them how to be caring, to nurture.

Her goal was not to become a principal per se. Her aim was to extend her talents as a teacher to create a school community that had more empathy for the parents, lower socioeconomic African Americans, in the neighborhood. That meant treating *all* people related to her school with dignity, caring, and concern, both professionally and personally. It meant maintaining her own individuality, thus, allowing faculty, staff, and students to know her as a person.

You have to really know your staff well to truly care. . . . It didn’t matter who you were. You still received the same treatment from me. We all were part of the family. I was pro-active. I showed emotion. I was still human.

It meant being a part of the community. She worked *with* the faculty and staff. “I never asked people to work on something that I didn’t do. I was always there

working with them.” She encouraged them to express themselves to her in any way they could. Her policy was to help them grow as professionals and persons by stimulating them to take risks, knowing she would be there to support them.

The principal made decisions that enveloped her in the community of students and parents, and contributed on a personal level to “uplifting” those in her community. She was aware of children’s hygiene, nutrition, and physical appearance, as well as the parents’ ability or likelihood to carry out responsibilities in those areas. She used part of the school’s budget to purchase a washer and dryer so all children would have clean clothing; she and her staff kept cabinets stocked with food for hungry students; and she, personally, bought items of clothing for children in need.

On Saturdays, she opened the school for “academic basketball,” a way for students to practice academic skills, participate in sports, and build relations. Recent ‘alumnae’ of the school were encouraged to attend as referees and to —tutor— ways in which to keep students engaged in schooling. And on Sundays, Mrs. R. and her sorority sisters worked on a Beau-tillion, an annual event honoring academically talented, Black high school males and used to encourage Black males to remain in school.

She served her community, but not through servitude. Mrs. R. sought to make sure that others’ highest priority needs were being met, while, simultaneously, seeking to ensure their growth as persons, or as Greenleaf (1970/1991) stated, they “became healthier, wiser, freer, and more autonomous . . . (p. 7).

Mrs. J. also defined herself through her community. She devoted her first year as principal to bringing the outside community into the school. She began by attending the churches in the neighborhood, a requirement for her predecessors in segregated Black schools in the early part of the century (McCullough-Garrett, 1993).

In a ninety-nine percent Black school, most families worship on Sunday. We can reach people at church that we can’t reach at home. We have to leave this place [the school] and go to where people are. My being there and asking for prayer . . . and to work with us . . . you better believe it has impact.

She invited the local pastors’ group to have their monthly meetings in the school; she encouraged parents to stop by; she visited with volunteers as they came and went; she opened the doors to community-sponsored groups to use the school. The first months she was at her school, the attendance at the fall parent-teacher conference was almost triple that of previous years. Creating community for Mrs. J. included caring for the emotional needs of individual faculty and students. She opened her door to teachers who were personally experiencing emotional —traumas— deaths of parents, physical illnesses (cancer, heart attacks), divorces, murder of relatives, and burnout. Because there were so many violent deaths among students, of critical importance to her was establishing grief counseling. “These children don’t feel any more. If they don’t feel, they won’t care. We have got to help them learn how to feel again . . .”

She refused to actively support programs and projects, refusing monies, that were not beneficial to the faculty's, staff's, and administration's overall goals for the school. At the risk of being criticized, the principal took unpopular stands.

She believed that in addition to improving curriculum and pedagogy, students needed health care, a nursery for those students who had children, and parenting classes for child-parents. She worked within the dichotomy of slave days and the 1990s "family values." During slavery, bearing children extended the most value to a female slave. Mothering was more important than marriage. Today, poor Black women are severely criticized for bearing children (Davis, 1981; Gould, 1996; James, 1993; Jones, 1985; Nobles, 1974a). The high school principal chose to traverse the extremes to support the mothers *and* fathers; to *teach* the child-parents how to be mothers and fathers to their children; to *teach* the students options to bearing children at that time in their lives.

So — being a woman — you can wait. You must sit quietly without a chip...Like Buddha — brown like I am — sat entirely at ease, entirely sure of himself; motionless and knowing...Motionless on the outside. But inside? (Bonner as cited in Collins, 1990, p. 92)

And Mrs. J. waited. She quietly absorbed the rebukes of staff members for not making changes quickly, for not acquiescing to their individual demands; she moved slowly, until funding from outside sources could be re-directed for the school and not for projects that would benefit the outsiders more than the students. She listened to faculty members complain about grief counseling for students because it took them out of classes, about her spending too much time in the community, about her breach of church and — state — because those were not 'school' improvements. She was "motionless" when some White teachers interpreted her involvement with the community as "paving her way to downtown [district office administration]". Those teachers failed to understand the connection between the community and who she was, not what position she hoped to get. A position opened in the district office; Mrs. J. remains at her first principalship. I think that she would agree with bell hooks (1990) in that "there is joy in the struggle" (p. 211).

The young assistant principal listened carefully to her mentor regarding a need for school to be an integral part of the community. Her school, however, was much different from her mentor's. As an alternative school, students lived throughout the city, denying a contiguous neighborhood to the school. Many of the parents took little or no interest in their children's academic progress, having given up on schooling long before the students entered the alternative school. Yet, Mrs. T. endeavored to make the school a community in which administrators, teachers, and students sensed interdependence among themselves. That was a monumental task, as teachers were used to being highly independent, rarely sharing ideas or materials, and socializing at lunch or in the halls on a limited basis. She commented, "It's been hard getting them to talk to me about their plans for students, let alone getting them

to share ideas with one another. They're just used to being on their own — turn in lesson plans, teach the students and go home. They have little contact with the administrators or other faculty." Asked about the student community, she responded that students were there because of court orders, worked one-on-one with their assigned teachers, and had virtually no involvement with other students. However, an exception was the support program for pregnant girls. She had worked closely with a teacher to develop it, and was in the process of extending the program to include childcare so the girls could continue with their schooling, as well as learn how to care for their babies. Mrs. T. described that effort as helping African Americans "learn to take care of themselves so they can stop blaming others for their problems."

These administrators were "womanist" in their thinking, "committed to the survival and *wholeness* [italics added] of an entire people, male and female" (Walker, 1983, p. ix).

Spirituality: Bridging Racial Uplift and Oneness of Being

"As a people who have had to deal with the absurdity of being Black in America, for many of us it is a question of God and sanity, or God and suicide" (hooks, 1990, p. 204). Not to discuss spirituality in a study of African American women leaders is to eliminate the thread that runs throughout all aspects of their lives. Spirituality, a force from slave days, continues as the foundation for the life of the Black community, and is both a source of power and comfort for these Black women.

Personal faith. Faith and involvement in their respective churches enabled them to more clearly envision their role in uplifting their people. They *expected* to participate integrally through their positions in racial uplift. They *anticipated* interdependence among all members of the school community as necessary for freedom, not *from*, but *to be*. They *accepted* their roles as leaders who would transform the school community into a group actively participating in their own uplifting. The church was their model for creating community.

[W]e come prepared to be "uplifted," and to become a part of a sacred community... "one more time". We enter with a sense of expectation — ready and anxious to participate . . . [T]he words exchanged in greetings have already begun to redefine us as one communal body [emphasis added]. (Richards, 1985, p. 219)

The women in this study assumed the role of the preacher, to an extent that the high school principal spoke of her position as "ministering to the faculty and students". They identified the members as "family," they counseled students and teachers as a preacher would, and they attempted to transform their schools into "one communal body."

The women exuded confidence in the quality of their own spirituality, a reflection of the power of religion among the slaves and their desire and willingness to spend much of their leisure time at prayer meetings (Genovese, 1972). The women

mentioned, as a matter of course, the amount of time spent in prayer before seeking or taking their administrative degrees and positions. Mrs. R. said that before she went into her building each morning, she sat in her car and prayed for the strength to be a support for teachers and students, for the safety of them all. The following comment by Mrs. J. reflects the importance of the Church in the all their lives:

My relationship with God is very important to me. I am a Christian. I must work on that relationship so regular worship is important . . . I ask for patience from my God that I will remain focused in spite of all these things that need fixing in this school.

Community and faith. Faith was prominent upon Mrs. J.'s appointment to the principalship. Her friends celebrated with her in her church, highlighting her professional accomplishments, but fore fronting her deep faith. A former student alluded to her "biblical righteousness" (Eugene, 1989, p. 48) in the ways she had mentored him.

Mrs. J. believed in the power of the church in the Black community. She used Sunday services at various churches to spread her message that students' academic success was necessary for the improvement of their communities. She needed their prayers, their help in keeping students in school, and their financial support. The community of congregations responded "more than I'd ever expected. They gave more money to the school and they are here to help in so many ways. They far exceeded my dreams for them."

None of the administrators hid her deep faith in God, a condition that bound many of the women within the schools together. There were lunches devoted to Bible study, prayer at the beginning of the day for some teachers, and planning together for various church functions. All who participated were Black women.

All of the women spoke openly to students and teachers about the Biblical reasons for doing particular tasks or acting in a certain way. Convocations opened and closed with a choir singing and leading the students in spirituals. A convener who connected school success with Biblical morality routinely introduced those student gatherings. The administrators in this study offered students and teachers who conferred with them the opportunity to end meetings with prayer, an option that often was used.

The visibility of their Christianity drew many students and some teachers to the Black women administrators. It also made them targets for criticism, particularly from White male teachers. Criticism took the form of questioning their competence. It was not unusual for Mrs. J. to say that she would pray about a particularly difficult issue, perhaps one that she and a teacher(s) could not resolve. White teachers interpreted such a response more often than not as a "cop-out" on the principal's part. In reference to both the principal and to her protégé, Mrs. T., White male teachers bitterly commented that the two Black women belonged to the "'Bible-thumping'" group of administrators on the move." The men viewed the administrators as using religion as a tool for positional advancement. The women, however,

did not insist that others embrace their, or any, religion. They did expect staff members to be respectful and sensitive to others.

The Black women leaders saw their schools as sites at which they lived and modeled their faith in order to strengthen the community. "For there is no closer bond that a group of Black people can feel than that which comes from the experience of feeling and expressing our deepest emotions together. The group becomes a sacred community once again, and so its members gain strength from communal experience" (Richards, 1985, p. 220).

Oneness of Being: Balancing Power with Caring

Each woman passionately stated her mission as that of modeling caring to her staff in order to teach them how to care for each other and their students. Mrs. J. talked about the need to nurture all within the community as the foundation for improving student academic success.

[Being an administrator] is more about the business of really caring about people. Really truly knowing that everybody is important. The respecting, the dignity, the worth of every individual . . . I do want people to care, truly care about the students and that's our business, to care about students and their parents. They need that.

Mrs. R. entered the field because she saw a tremendous need to teach teachers how to care for students. "Teachers needed to know how to nurture kids first. Let them know — make them know — that you cared, that you truly cared about them and their welfare." And Mrs. T., unclear regarding her desire to remain in administration, had no doubts as to her purpose: "These young people need to know they are cared for. This school is their last chance and it is up to me to work with the teachers to show them how to love these sometimes-unlovable young adults. We may be the last chance any of these young people have."

However, love and care for students and teachers did not emanate from a sentimentalized view of caring, but from "militant nurturing" (Casey, 1993, p. 150), akin to the ways in which the slave mothers taught their daughters to protect themselves from the master (Collins, 1990; Cone, 1984; Davis, 1981; hooks, 1981, 1989; Jones, 1985; Robertson, 1996). Each of the Black women leaders did not fear taking a "tough" stand, using her authority over teachers, students and parents to assure the survival of the greatest number of youngsters in her school, community, and, ultimately, her race. They experienced no dichotomy between power and caring. Using authority did not cancel out caring, but enhanced it to become caring power.

Mrs. T. used her positional power to mandate teachers in her school to re-think their teaching and pedagogy. For Mrs. T., it was not enough for teachers to take pride in simply getting students through school. She expected them to help students plan a life beyond high school that is, attendance of vocational school, community college, or a four-year college. "Now it wasn't easy, but I insisted that we have got

to see the potential in these young people. . . . We were going to teach these students as if they were the brightest and best.” She used her authority to make changes in the curriculum. She, however, interpreted her use of “we” to literally include herself as part of the teachers’ working team to develop better pedagogical practices.

She also took strong positions with the students. No longer were students allowed to sign an academic contract and then ignore it. She reviewed each student’s contracts and spoke with students who were not honoring theirs. With the support of her principal, she gave ultimatums to students who were continuously delinquent in their work. When a 21-year old student again failed to complete a contract he had agreed to, she expelled him. Her rationale: “If he wouldn’t work with me and his teachers to save himself, I couldn’t sacrifice all the rest for one.” She believed the individual owes responsibility to self *and* to the collective.

Parents, as part of the school community, need to receive care and to be taught how to contribute to the collective. Mrs. R. dealt with many mothers who were prostitutes. She was not critical of their work, but expected them to care for their children, and to care for the community of students by the way in which they treated their own. Having spoken to a mother about her child’s disruptive behavior and providing her with ways to help the girl, Mrs. R. personally took the child home after another disturbance and refused to allow her back into the school until the mother took responsibility of getting help for the behavior problems. “The mother was in my office the next morning — mad. I explained, again, the needs of her child. I told her that the teacher and I would help her. But, we expected her to follow through to help us manage the child — and to teach the child acceptable behavior.”

The Black society, like the slave communities, cannot afford to lose the “mutual interdependency” of communal living (hooks, 1990, p. 206). Mrs. R. recognized the need for interdependency between school staff and parents. Balancing power with caring for the Black female leaders was using their authority to strengthen community through interdependence, and to allow the individual to develop within that community. The women were comfortable using their personal and positional power to achieve caring for the collective.

Implications for School Leadership

Feminists examine the impact of gender on the conceptual understanding and implementation of leadership. It is also important to understand the significance of race and culture as they affect the values, beliefs, and behaviors of leaders. The African American female leaders in this study reflect African, as well as American slave heritage — integrating the development and goals of the individual and the community for racial uplift; acknowledging the importance of spirituality to attain racial uplift and Oneness of being; and viewing life as complementary counterparts, a Oneness of being rather than as a series of dichotomies, in their understanding and execution of their leadership roles.

If schools are to become caring places, there must be caring for the collective (Tronto, 1993). However, an ethic of caring as discussed by Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (1984), focuses on caring between individuals. Although the Black women exhibited use of the tenets of an ethic of — caring — they emphasized relationships, recognized the needs of their individual schools and communities, were committed, and gave and received caring — they were able to effect a collective caring, having an historical tradition of being one with the Black community (Collins, 1990; Reid-Merritt, 1996).

An ethic of caring from a Euro-American perspective emphasizes *building* community, whereas African Americans, traditionally, *have had* community. The Black female administrators strived to maintain and strengthen their communities by supporting and strengthening the individuals that make up the collective Black community. They had a common purpose, that of uplifting their race. Their success as individuals was intertwined with the success of their schools and communities so that the individual and the community were difficult to separate. Achieving success within their schools extended to advancing the power of their race. The women's goals were clear, for they were derived from personal history.

The Black female leaders cared for individuals, thus allowing the individual to take care of her or himself. They used caring power, the authority of their positions and persons, to draw individuals back into the community to become selves within the collective, rather than apart from it, and to add to the strength of the larger community. They used power for racial uplift more than for personal gain. "We must strive to 'lift as we climb.' . . . We must climb in such a way as to guarantee that all our sisters, regardless of social class, and indeed all of our brothers climb with us. This must be the essential dynamic of our quest for power" (Davis, 1989, p. 5).

Beyond an ethic of caring, the Black women embraced the power of their spirituality, another cultural tradition. They lived their values and openly acknowledge their belief in a Christian God.

Finally, the women had the strength of their foremothers, African women of communal societies and female slaves. They were willing to take action, to "run toward the situation rather than putting someone up in front of them or retreating" (Dowling, 1994, p. 54). Caring was not viewed as weakness (Tronto, 1993), but as strength. The women were willing to serve in order that others would grow in health, freedom, and wisdom.

The past histories and experiences of African American women leaders contributed to their lessened concern with dichotomous relationships that often trouble educational leaders. They were not afraid of power, as the "were motivated by their social consciousness" and viewed "power in the collective sense" (Reid-Merritt, 1996, p. 195). They balanced caring *with* power; integrated the individual and the community, effecting a *collective* caring; and served their schools with autonomy and power used *in behalf of others* (Ruether, 1975). They moved toward the creation of schools in which caring flourished by caring *for*, not taking care of; by

understanding that interdependence *requires* accountability *and* responsibility on the parts of both the leader and the community members; by having their primary commitment to the larger community; and by viewing their spirituality as the process of living out a set of deeply held personal values. They *presumed* an integration of caring and power, a commitment to community above that to the individual, and an emphasis on a spiritual component, the latter of which is an essential, if not an inherent, aspect of African American women's lives. They had a vision that extended beyond their immediate personages: they wanted to "uplift" their community, their race.

I suggest that as a result of African ethos and slave experiences, it is not unusual for African American women to view life as continuous and spiraling, a union of factors rather than concrete, separate and opposing pieces. That viewpoint contributes greatly to their ability to develop a caring community.

The above dispositions are not intended to be essentialist, but derive from the notion of "culture," understood in part from its involuntary nature. That is, through direct and indirect influence of historical occurrences and present experiences, Black women often interpret their lives in relation to their communities and to the larger society in order to construct personal identities. Those identities reflect African and American cultures, whether the women choose to acknowledge those backgrounds or not. Understood as innate as well as socially constructed, culture, from which race is inseparable, becomes an important influence on the theory and practice of leadership.

If educational reformers and policymakers believe schools would be better as caring places, then caring must be conceptualized within a framework that allows for multiple cultural perspectives and that emphasizes the well-being of the collective. Furthermore, Euro-American teachers and administrators need to recognize a multiplicity of ways in which to be considerate, compassionate, and understanding, some of which may not necessarily "feel" comfortable, but may be perceived as nurturing acts by their non-Euro-American students and colleagues.

In a broader sense, this article suggests that the racial and cultural history of school leaders has the potential to deeply influence their understandings of and actions to meet the educational needs of students who are like themselves. Given a U.S. society that is highly diverse, that is, consisting of many cultures in addition to those of Western European tradition, it is no longer sufficient to envision all schools operating from the same curricular, pedagogical, and behavioral perspectives. Educational policymakers and leaders who care about *all* children will seek to create schools that employ teaching methods, school organization, and human relations that are attuned to the values, wants, and needs of their particular school communities. That will require expanding the framework of schooling to include more than white, middle class values, and to respect the notion that shared values may be expressed in different but acceptable ways among people of different races and cultures. Ultimately, that will necessitate an acceptance of qualities associated

with persons of non-white races and cultures as legitimate aspects of schooling. For schools to become caring places for all children, the organization, processes, and procedures of schooling must be taken apart and rebuilt to accommodate diversity. It becomes incumbent upon all educators and policymakers to seek out new and varied tools with which to do the work, and to find the leaders who understand how to use them. The master's tools are insufficient to redesign the master's house to accommodate the People.

Notes

¹In recent years, women of color have challenged feminist theory and critiques because those works do not fit the facts of their lives. Although "women do share common experiences...the experiences are not generally the same type as those affecting racial and ethnic groups" (Hill Collins, 1990, p.27). Not to address the effect of race and culture on the lived experiences of women of color is to deny the "insidious influence [of color] on identity and behavior...[a]nd...[the fact] that color consciousness continues to dominate the lives of most African Americans" (Jackson, 1990, p.39) and other women of color as well (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983); and is to deny that racism continues to be a standard and established aspect of the American social landscape (Lynn, 1999; Bell, 1992).

²I use the terms "black" and "African American" interchangeably in reference to racial background.

³Syncretistic reasoning refers to an attempt to unite and harmonize different forms of belief or practices that seem to have no logical unity.

⁴Fictive kin refers to non-blood community members who lived with a family.

⁵Although not a formal position, community Othermothers tend to be at least forty-plus years, having had at that stage of lifetime to learn about and develop a sense of the community's tradition and culture (James, 1993).

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